



Sandia Soar'n 2006: The High-Mile Club

Article and photos by Gigi Van der Riet



Adrian on Sandia Crest launch in very windy conditions, with wire crew John Hesch (L), Jim Stelzer (R) and Andrew Vanis (nose)

My husband Adrian and I first visited Albuquerque, New Mexico, in April of 2006. We spent five wonderful days there, two hang gliding under the expert guidance of Andrew Vanis, Sandia Soar'n coordinator, and the other three sight-seeing around Albuquerque and nearby Santa Fe on Andrew's knowledgeable recommendation.

My hang glider pilot husband and I, a willing recovery driver, had recently emigrated from South Africa, and last spring and summer we were traveling the USA in search of a new home. Our six-month tour of the country was mapped out to include as many hang gliding sites as possible, and the city of Albuquerque and its sentinel peak, Sandia, had captured our hearts.

June is the time for the annual Sandia Soar'n, so we returned to Albuquerque to fulfill the promise of excellent hang gliding and cement new friendships. We arrived in mid-June, a few days early for the official start of the fly-in, to learn that the day prior to our arrival our friend Andrew Vanis and Kent Robinson, a pilot from Dallas, had flown east over 160 miles. Andrew had set a personal

best of 186 miles – just a few miles short of the Texas state line. Kent landed at the Tucumcari airport, 162 miles from launch. This was an auspicious start to the week and we made plans to go up the mountain that Monday for a late-afternoon warm-up soaring session.

On Tuesday morning we joined Sandia hang gliding guide John Nagyvary and another local pilot, Curt Slack, on the Sandia Crest launch, which is set among large communications towers on top of

Sandia. High clouds covered much of the sky and the wind, albeit light, had a southerly component coming in across takeoff. Light cycles, however, were consistently pulling straight up launch and all three pilots launched successfully.

Adrian, after initially sinking low, had caught a small thermal that rocketed him to over 17,000 feet and, as the wind had turned westerly, decided to go east on cross-country. I started down the mountain in pursuit after hearing that John



Kent Robinson on launch with wire crew Andrew (nose) and Jim Stelzer (R)



Adrian safely on the ground at Big Sky LZ

and Curt had landed safely at the Big Sky Hang Glider Park LZ in town below. I expected to hear from Adrian that he was going down in one of the many suitable fields, but he radioed to say I should take I-40 east as he was high and moving fast. It seemed I would have a bit of a chase on my hands after all!

Nine hours after launching, Adrian flagged me down as I drove along the main street of Tucumcari after dark. More than seven hours of flying had seen him through light sleet at 16,000 feet where he suffered the elements, a thermal caught low over the deck that shot him back up to 12,000', loss of radio contact due to a dead battery and, finally, no cell phone signal on the ground. Lack of lift, uninhabited landing areas and a headwind 10 miles beyond Tucumcari had prompted him to turn back and he landed in a field, owned by the district attorney, adjacent to the airport. The DA kindly offered Adrian the use of his telephone and drove him into town to wait for my arrival. I, after losing radio contact, had frantically searched the fields along the highway in the fading light before turning into town to find my husband, tired



Pilots lined up and ready to step up to launch on Saturday, 17 June.

but pleased with a new personal-best cross-country flight of 168 miles.

The next day, the official start of the Sandia Soar'n, conditions unfortunately deteriorated. More high clouds and a strong, gusty southwesterly wind did not bode well. A pilot from California,

John Hesch, joined Andrew, Kent and Adrian, and a local paraglider pilot, Jim Stelzer, volunteered his services as recovery driver.

Adrian, feeling the effects of his exertion from the day before (partly due to having foolishly refused the loan of an



Adrian on Sandia Crest launch ready for the triangle task



oxygen tank), decided not to fly. John, Kent and Andrew all got off the mountain safely and we left the confines of the tower compound to sit at the public lookout point and watch them soar. They all soon climbed above the threshold of 13,000 MSL that would allow them to safely go over the back of the mountain, and headed off.

As forecast, conditions proved difficult for the pilots to stay aloft and one by one they landed within a 25-mile radius of takeoff. Kent and Andrew headed northeast and John took a more easterly direction. We retrieved Kent, who was nearest, and carried on up Highway 14 to pick up Andrew, who had notched up the flight of the day. Jim went in search of John, who had landed in the Cedar Grove area; we all met up in Madrid, a little artist town full of galleries and restaurants, for an early dinner of "buffalo" burgers.

Conditions for Thursday were predicted to be poor with high winds on launch. Since many of us in the group are avid rock climbers we spent the day in the Jemez Mountains at an easily accessible sport-climbing site. This was a welcome change of mountain scenery and, I believe, a well-deserved break for a hard-working recovery driver.

On Friday we all traipsed up the mountain again. At 10 a.m. it was already blowing quite strongly and Kent was quickly rigged and ready. With the aid of a wire crew he was soon launched and climbing fast.

The wind speed picked up significantly and the rotor could be felt in the rigging area behind launch. I held Andrew's glider while Adrian was up on launch with an apprehensive wire-crew, waiting for a lull. They stood some time in the strong, turbulent conditions and after

a brief consultation Adrian backed off, much to my relief. A quick check of his vario showed that it had actually registered a flight! Blissfully unaware of our blown-out plight, Kent racked up 50 miles for the only flight of the day.

Local hang glider pilots arrived en masse on Saturday, along with two visitors from as far afield as Las Cruces and Denver. The morale was high as the day's weather was forecast to be excellent. An open-distance task was set and the general rules and responsibilities were discussed at the pilots' briefing.

One by one pilots stepped up to launch and 12 gliders took to the air in fairly short order. A gaggle, including Adrian, Kent, Brian Kurowski and Bill Lemmon climbed up over the southern end of the mountain and headed east in loose formation.



Adrian flying above Sandia, south of the Crest take-off

Flying IFR – “I Follow Roads” – the gaggle cruised high above I-40 to the east. Having learned his lesson, Adrian had accepted the loan of oxygen and bar mitts and was well dressed for high flying. Jim and I drove down the mountain to follow the gaggle heading east.

At about 35 miles out I saw a glider turning for final approach in a field next to the highway near an overpass. I radioed to say I was taking the off-ramp and could easily retrieve him from the frontage road. Jim drove on to maintain communication and visual contact with the remaining three.

Brian – the downed pilot – and I were soon instructed to head south off 1-40 toward Encino as the wind had turned northwesterly. We quickly caught up with Jim, who had spotted a glider low over a field to the east, but that pilot had soon climbed out again, and all three

were now cutting the corner toward Vaughn to the southeast. Kent was leading the pack and at the next junction in the roads it was agreed to head east along US60 toward Ft. Sumner.

About 30 miles farther along course the gliders began to lose altitude. First Kent made a smooth landing at 102 miles. Bill sailed by for another mile or so and deposited his glider safely on the ground. Adrian, not to be outdone, added another 13 miles to the total and, in no-wind conditions, also landed safely – if not exactly elegantly.

This delighted trio of pilots had each flown over 100 miles in not quite six hours. The conditions had proved good, but their skills even better as the day had remained blue without a thermal marker to be seen anywhere.

At the pilots’ (and two recovery drivers’) celebratory breakfast on Sunday

morning, Kent received a prize for the greatest cumulative distance, Adrian for the longest flight and Jim for the most altruistic recovery drive. I, of course, have a vested interest. The support of the hang glider equipment manufacturers is heartening and meet organizer Andrew had wonderful prizes and gifts for everyone.

Sunday dawned as promising as the day before and a suggestion to set a triangle task was greeted with enthusiasm. Breakfast was quickly consumed and all pilots without prior Father’s Day commitments were once again headed for the hills.

Only a small group remained. Steve Ford, the pilot from Denver, joined the three amigos, Andrew, Kent and Adrian. It took some time for Adrian to get rigged and ready – a minor readjustment was necessary to get the VG on his glider operating smoothly. So, with energy



Andrew Vanis on launch with wire crew
Adrian (nose) and Jim (R)

levels flagging, the other three settled in to rest in the shade or in the back of a car. Shortly after 2:00 Adrian was the first to take to the sky, followed by Kent and then Steve. Twenty minutes later I saw Andrew off and the race was on.

The task, first to reach goal at Edgewood, included a turnpoint over Estancia airport (39 miles southeast of takeoff), then Moriarty airport (15 miles north of Estancia) and a run into the wind for 12 miles to goal at Edgewood airport.

Adrian was determined to attempt one further goal – to fly back over the mountain above launch and land in the LZ in town. He is an avid competitor in the hang gliding Online Contest (OLC) and was hoping the triangle would be FAI spec and score him the highest points possible for each mile.

Three pilots made goal, two landing in

Edgewood and Adrian succeeding in his attempt to cross back over Sandia again – an extremely rare and challenging feat that has only been done a handful of times, according to locals. Five hours and 11 minutes after takeoff I was at Big Sky to see Adrian achieve another personal best, a completed launch-to-launch triangle (unfortunately not FAI spec), that covered 84 miles.

Four days of flying netted 372 miles for Adrian and ratcheted him up to 27th position in the OLC. However, he was not alone in racking up the miles at this truly magnificent site.

Anyone can join the mile-high club, but only a talented few achieve membership in the high-mile club.

The Sandia Soaring association would like to thank all the sponsors of the 2006 Soar'n, especially Flytec, Moyes, High Energy, and Airtime Above.

The 2007 event is June 6-10. You can get details from Andrew Vanis, (505) 304-5306 or vanis13@yahoo.com. More information about the site and the event are online at www.flysandia.org.

Gigi, a public relations consultant and freelance writer from South Africa, began hang gliding training in South Africa and hopes to complete her training once the couple settles down in the USA. Adrian, trained in South Africa, is a H-4 rated pilot and is currently flying an Aeros Discus. At the Big Spring Pre-Worlds in Texas, held in August last year, he placed third in the Sport Class.

